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HOOF CARE MYTHS - WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HOOVES

How often have we all heard that much repeated cliché “no foot, no horse?”

No doubt many of us have at times discovered the truth in those words. Similar to a car with a flat tyre or a guitar with broken strings, a horse with poor hooves is severely limited in his usefulness. So how do we keep a horse's hooves in their best condition? Like most horsey topics, there is a wealth of information out there, along with manufactured products. There are any number of theories, legends, old wives tales and the like, some of which directly conflict with each other so is it any wonder many of us become confused and just give up?

Many items of questionable origin have eventually been acknowledged as truth simply because they have been around so long. We will attempt to explore some of the more common misconceptions on hoof care, and look for the reality behind the folklore.

Legend Number 1: White hooves are always softer and have more problems than black hooves.

Hoof colour is determined by the colour of the skin directly above it. If the horse has white socks or stockings, the chances are pretty high that he will have hooves of the same pigmentation. Many people will tell you that hooves with black walls are far superior to hooves with white walls.

So much so, that I am able to recall a ditty word for word years after I first heard it:

One white foot, buy a horse; two white feet, try a horse; three white feet, look well about him; four white feet, do without him.

Now this may have something to do with superstition back in the dark ages but my pick is that this is related to the perception that white feet are somehow inferior to black ones. If it had been taken literally by



horse owners over the years, many decent performers in all disciplines may well have been consigned to the scrap heap before they started their illustrious careers!

Farriers I have spoken to, as well as those who have carried out scientific studies overseas, are unanimous. On an individual horse with both black hooves and white hooves, there is absolutely no difference in the structure, texture or quality of each hoof. If a horse has poor quality feet, it will not make any difference whether the hooves are black or white. Similarly if a horse has good feet, they will be good feet whatever colour they are.

A horse on the whole will have good hooves or indifferent hooves; colour is not a factor in that. Genetics, on the other hand, are more likely to affect the quality of your horse's feet. Thoroughbreds are notorious for having chalky, soft hooves while Appaloosas are renowned for their extremely strong feet, whatever the colour. Some horses of a particular breed will have awful feet; while others will have good strong hooves. If a parent of your horse has dodgy feet, then the chances of your horse inheriting that trait are definitely greater.

Fact or Fiction Number 2: All horses need hoof supplements added to their feed.

OK, so why would we want to add a supplement to a feed in the first place? Perhaps that might mean there is something missing from his diet in the first place? The need to supplement feed depends on the nutritional balance of the diet to begin with. If his diet is balanced, supplementation may not be necessary. But horses are like people in many ways - some people can have enviable health, perfect teeth, and nails naturally, where others will struggle to measure up no matter how much money they spend. Likewise with horses - some will thrive on grass in a paddock, where others will have all sorts of problems regardless of what they ingest and how many supplements and feeds we present to them.

Biotin is a common ingredient in many "complete feeds" now, along with methionine. Connective tissue is greatly assisted by biotin, while methionine is an amino acid essential for sturdy hooves.

In our massive competitive consumer marketplace, there is any number of supplements available in which to help you. The many products declare they will help your horse's hoof quality; so often the best way to find out which is best for your horse, is by trial and error. Unless of course you are able to get an objective opinion from someone you know who has already done some homework.

It is important to appreciate that every horse can respond differently, so what may work miracles in one case will be next to useless on another horse.

Your veterinarian may also be a useful person to consult if you believe your horse needs a supplement. Getting your soil and feeds analysed may give you important information to assist you. Bear in mind though, that not too many hoof supplements will be effective on a horse that is in poor condition and generally deficient anyway.

Many factors contribute to bad feet. These include genetics, obesity or on the other hand poor condition. Seasonal conditions (wet mucky ground) or poor stable management can also play a part in less than optimum hoof condition.

Half-truth Number 3: A piece of gravel can work its

way up from the bottom of the hoof through the coronary band.

A hoof abscess will take the line of least resistance. Often the horse will step on something which creates an abscess. This abscess needs to escape somewhere, as it can't come through the wall of the hoof. Left unattended long enough, an abscess may burst out the top of the coronary band or at the back of the heel, depending on where it started from. A piece of gravel will not literally work its way up the hoof, but an abscess will.

Fairy Story Number 4: Oil products help seal in moisture.

I am confident that every one of us has at least one variety of hoof oil in our collection. Just as we all have at least one moisturiser or sunscreen in our bathroom cupboard. The range and selection of both of these products is endless. There are actually two different types of products available for hooves. One is oil based and aims to add moisture to the hoof, while the other is more of a sealant, designed to keep moisture in – or out – of the hoof.

Opinion is divided as to whether any of this is actually of any benefit to the horse. The oil based dressings are designed to nourish and moisturise the hoof. However many horsemen will insist that this type of dressing should only be applied to the coronary band, as it is only really effective on new hoof growth and a sealant should be used on the rest of the foot. They argue that oil all over the foot will actually soften it and, where regular oiling is employed in a hot climate, the hoof will be wet then dry, with the associated expanding and contracting which only serves to weaken the hoof, not to mention loosening shoes.

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Yet others maintain that the best hoof conditioner is the water your horse drinks, as it is this which keeps him and his hooves hydrated.

Once again there would seem to be no one solution. Consider your horse's living conditions, how and what he is expected to do, give him the best and cleanest facilities possible and use whatever gives the best result for your particular horse.

Myth Number 5: Hot shoeing hurts the horse.

When a blacksmith/farrier hot shoes a horse, he will make the shoe and then custom fit it to the horse. In this process, the hot shoe is applied to the horse's hoof, which has the effect of burning where the shoe is applied – it is hot, after all! This generates a distinctive smell, which can startle the unsuspecting horse, however it won't hurt him.

People who swear by hot shoeing will say that the burning seals the hoof and also the farrier can see where the shoe is sitting precisely on the foot, i.e. are there any high or low spots? Others will argue that this process dries out or damages the foot. In actual fact, there are no nerve endings in a horse's hoof, much like our fingernails.

Misconception Number 6: Horses get thrush from standing on wet ground.

An infection of the frog and sole of your horse's foot could be thrush but it is not caused just by wet conditions alone. In order for thrush to develop, bacteria and fungi must exist. This is easily achieved with a dirty box or yard.

Hooves with thrush will smell really bad, and have a black discharge around the frog. If you allow it to go far enough you can end up with a lame horse. This will happen when the condition is allowed to get into the sensitive structure of the foot.

Regular cleaning of the feet, combined with proper stable management will help lessen the incidence of infection. If you find that your horse's feet don't smell as good as they should and/or you detect the black discharge, cleaning and applying a copper sulphate product or iodine will treat the problem. Your blacksmith/farrier

schedule is also a great preventative measure where thrush is concerned.

Fairy Tale Number 7: Because factory made shoes have four nails holes on each side, you should use them all.

Your farrier is at liberty to use as many nails as he likes to nail a shoe on your horse. Generally a craftsman will use as many as are necessary, and no more. The usual number is four on the outside and three on the inside but various factors may conspire to make this impractical. A very small foot would be unnecessarily weakened with too many nails or the hoof may have a missing or weaker part that would be fruitless to nail to. Clips will also assist in keeping a shoe in place.

The nail holes in factory shoes and plates are put there as options. Some shoes and aluminium plates have ten or twelve; it is never because that is the number needed. It may be that the farrier can get two nails on an area then needs to move further on around to find decent hoof to nail to, if the options were not there your horse would pull more shoes than the farrier could nail on.

Your horse's hooves grow and change all the time. Some parts of the hoof are healthier than others for whatever reason and the nails need to be driven into healthy wall for the best result. As the hoof grows relatively slowly (about quarter of an inch per month), it is always better to avoid damaging the hoof wall than attempt to repair it!

Fable Number 8: Barefoot horses need farrier attention less often than shod horses.

Many people advocate leaving a horse barefoot for part of the year. Ostensibly this is to let them "recover" from shoes and the idea is that a rest from shoes will result in hoof growth which will give the farrier better hoof to work with when shoes are put on again. In my experience financial factors often play a major part in this theory too!!

There are factors particular to each horse that requires evaluating before this method is adopted though. In New Zealand many horses are turned out over the

winter months and it is certainly more cost effective not to keep them shod. But, before taking this giant leap, think about your horse specifically. Is he subjected to very hard or stony ground? Is he still going to be asked to work in a sand arena over this time or do roadwork? Is he sure-footed? Does he need corrective shoeing? Are his feet basically good or are they truly awful?

The reason for these considerations is because going barefoot can often create problems that were not there when he was shod. His feet may wear faster than they should due to sand, stones or whatever else. He may have increased likelihood of slipping over in his paddock and injuring himself, if he is that way inclined. Your farrier may have embarked on a corrective shoeing mission that would be flawed if you pulled the plug half way through. His feet may break, split, or be susceptible to under run soles, seedy toe, thrush or any other nasty condition if he goes 'au naturel.' This could mean that when you do want to reshoe him you are not able to and you will have actually gone backwards. Every horse is different.

If you do remove his shoes (and many horses are perfectly OK barefoot the whole time!), don't think your days of paying the farrier have ended. Regular hoof care will ensure his feet are even and maintained in optimum condition. The hooves will continue to grow!

Above all, after considering all the pros and cons and taking the advice of your blacksmith/farrier too, you really have to do what you believe is the best for your horse.

